

Aging in Community Opportunities for Delaware's Senior Population: The Significance of Accessible Community Transportation Options

By Julia O'Hanlon | November 2014

Access to affordable and reliable transportation for the elderly is a concern for many communities, especially in rural areas where service is practically nonexistent.

While they want to remain active, many retirees find themselves homebound for lack of transportation. Only 1.2 percent of seniors use public transportation on a daily basis, while the vast majority rely on friends and family for rides.

National Aging in Place Council

What Does it Mean to Age in Community?

As defined by the National Aging in Place Council (NAPC), aging in place (i.e., aging in community), is “the ability to continue to live in one’s home safely, independently, and comfortably, regardless of age, income, or ability level. It means living in a familiar environment, and being able to participate in family and other community activities (2014).” The World Health Organization (2007) notes that aging in place/community aims to reverse or lessen the decrease in functional capacity that occurs with age. As a comprehensive approach to staying in one’s community/home, aging in place involves a variety of issues facing senior citizens, including housing, finance, health, education, recreation, and transportation.

How Is Mobility Linked to Being Able to Age in Place?

Research confirms that mobility is a vital factor to longer-term health and independence of older adults. Given the inverse relationship between mobility and transportation options and aging, mobility issues are particularly important for seniors. In other words, transportation options typically decrease as people age (IPA, 2007). Many older adults without a reliable, accessible, and affordable transportation mode are at risk of increased social isolation, decreased volunteer and economic opportunities, and overall poor health (IPA, 2007).

National reports indicate that the rate of seniors moving to rural areas has tripled since the 1990s and is projected to continue (NCSL, 2011). Limited public transportation options paired with an increasing senior population

may lead to increasing rates of isolation and decreased quality of life. Many older adults choose to reside in rural areas that are not served by public transportation because housing is more affordable. A 2004 study by the Surface Transportation Policy Project estimates that nearly 40 percent of the country's transit-dependent population—primarily senior citizens, people with disabilities, and low-income individuals—reside in rural areas. A 2003 study by the Brookings Institution, found that 79 percent of seniors age 65 and older live in car-dependent suburban and rural communities. Creating meaningful transportation options could increase homebound seniors' ability to remain active in social activities, economic and volunteer opportunities and to have increased access to nutritious foods (Rosenbloom, 2003).

Why Is this Important to Delawareans?

Like many states, Delaware has a higher number of individuals living in and moving to less dense, more suburban or rural areas of the state. These areas tend to lack transportation alternatives that allow individuals to remain active within their community once they can no longer rely on their personal vehicle.

The number of Delaware seniors is projected to increase even further due to aging baby boomers and increased life expectancy. As of 2010, Delaware's 65 and older (65+) population accounted for about seven percent of the state's total population. By 2030, projections indicate that the number of residents 65+ will comprise approximately 23 percent of the state's total population. According to these projections, the proportion of the state's seniors compared to the overall population in

Delaware will be larger than national figures (Delaware Department of Health and Social Services, University of Delaware's Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research, 2012).

As the most populated county in Delaware, New Castle County is expected to experience the highest increase in its senior population over the next several decades, followed by Sussex and Kent Counties. However, by 2030, Sussex County—Delaware's largest (geographically) and most rural jurisdiction—will likely experience the largest *percentage increase* of seniors, and incur rapid growth

in the number of “older” (85+) seniors. Three major trends related to the growth of Sussex County's senior population over the next several decades:

- The number of Sussex Countians age 65+ is expected to reach about 80,000—*nearly twice* the number in 2010.
- Thirty percent of Sussex County residents will be 65+ compared to 23 percent of Delawareans.
- The number of Sussex Countians age 85+ will increase dramatically from 4,195 to just over 12,000—*nearly a three-fold increase* from 2010.

Statewide senior-population projections, particularly significant projected increases in more rural areas where fewer transportation options currently exist, are becoming an important issue in Delaware. Sparse taxi services, coupled with limited transit options (mainly of paratransit vehicles and transportation services offered by community organizations like senior centers), will likely result in greater challenges for individuals, families, state nonprofits, transportation providers, and health and social service agencies. As the state's population ages, integrated and community-based options for transportation will become increasingly important for Delawareans who wish to age in place.

For additional resources and information about Delaware's senior population and aging in community, please visit:

- > www.ipa.udel.edu/healthpolicy/srcenters/projectpubs.html
- > www.ipa.udel.edu/healthpolicy/srcenters/resources.html
- > <http://t4america.org/docs/SeniorsMobilityCrisis.pdf>
- > <http://completecommunitiesde.org/planning/healthy-and-livable/aging>

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